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German elite celebrates Bundeswehr anniversary with display of militarism

By Johannes Stern
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“The citadel of militarism” is how Bertha von Suttner, the well-known anti-militarist, described Berlin in the time of the German Empire before the outbreak of the First World War. Tourists and Berlin residents who found themselves near the Reichstag (German parliament) building Wednesday evening, would have gotten the impression that the German elite is, despite its crimes in two world wars, once again courting this “title.”

Behind large barriers and with strict security measures in place, the German parliament and the Ministry of Defense commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the Bundeswehr with the so-called “Grand Tattoo” military ceremony. Click here to see video.

The atmosphere was chilling. In attendance were President Joachim Gauck, members of the German parliament and 2,500 invited guests—“around one quarter” of whom were “members of the military serving as representatives of each unit of the Bundeswehr” according to an official statement of the Ministry of Defense. Marching in front of the podium were 320 soldiers in parade uniform bearing torches. Eighty more marine torchbearers were positioned at the entrances to the Reichstag to “frame” the “Grand Tattoo.”



German soldiers adjust their chinstraps in unison during the “Grand Tattoo” ceremony in Berlin.

Hardly any event could have better demonstrated the military traditions in which the Bundeswehr stands. The Grand Tattoo, its highest military ceremony, has its roots in Prussian militarism. In its current form, it can be traced back to the Grand Tattoo performed to honour Russian Tsar Nicholas I in Berlin on May 12, 1838. After that, it was celebrated in the Prussian army, the armed forces of the German Empire and the “Reichswehr” (Reich Defense) of the Weimar Republic before reaching its high point in the “Wehrmacht” of the Third Reich.

In their official speeches on the German military, Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Bundestag President Norbert Lammert attempted to conceal the historical roots and character of the Bundeswehr and present it as the pillar of “democracy” and “peace.” That is just as false today as it was when the Bundeswehr was founded on November 12, 1955.

In fact, during that time it was still known as the “new Wehrmacht” (it was not officially renamed “Bundeswehr” until 1956). The name says it all. Until 1957, each of the 44 appointed generals and admirals came from the old Wehrmacht of Hitler, mainly from the general staff of the armed forces. In 1959, 12,360 of the 14,900 soldiers in the officer corps had been officers in the Wehrmacht, and 300 came from the SS.

In his 2011 study “Militarism in Germany: History of a Warlike Culture,” military historian Wolfram Wette wrote that “this continuity of personnel was a heavy burden for the inner life of the Bundeswehr” and “for a long time in the officer corps of the Bundeswehr in the Bonn Republic the predominate tendency [...] was to orient toward the traditions which prevailed before 1945.”

With reunification 25 years ago, these “predominate tendencies” were again strengthened. In 1991, one general declared: “For the combat efficiency of the Bundeswehr, training, equipment and structure must be aligned. That has to include ethic, education, a sense of purpose and motivation.” Since then, the Bundeswehr has been systematically transformed into an

intervention force—or more to the point—a war army which defends the interests of German imperialism worldwide.

Bundestag President Lammert proudly declared in his speech that “since 1992, the Bundeswehr has found itself in continuous foreign deployments.” Germany, he declared, is one of the largest troop suppliers in international missions and accepts its responsibilities. More than 380,000 soldiers have taken part in foreign deployments thus far. “Domestic Bundeswehr missions” are also substantial. Lammert stressed that “at the moment, only half as many soldiers are committed to foreign missions as they are to refugee aid at home.”

Von der Leyen made clear in her remarks that the combat missions of recent years were only the beginning. The Bundeswehr was “the army of a country that knows its responsibility to the world.” One must now “take our concerns to our friends in the east” and “prepare ourselves for threats from the South.” In “a few days” representatives from 20 countries would “come to Berlin to discuss further action in Afghanistan.”

Von der Leyen then thanked the soldiers in the field who fight and die for Germany—“the soldiers in northern Iraq, helping the Kurdish Peshmerga to defend themselves,” the “European fighter pilots who secure the airspace over the Baltics,” and the “soldiers who fell in the Good Friday battle in Afghanistan.” They all deserve “the active support of our society and our state. They deserve our backing and our hearts.”

While a large majority of the population rejects the foreign deployment of the Bundeswehr and detests their military rituals, the ruling elite stand entirely behind them. Above all, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party have in recent years transformed themselves into staunch militarists.

Twenty years ago, the then SPD chairman Rudolf Scharping caused a scandal when he refused to take part in the Grand Tattoo ceremony commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Bundeswehr in 1995.



Soldiers march with lit torches during the “Grand Tattoo” ceremony in Berlin.

When the then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl reacted “furiously,” the chair of the Green Party’s parliamentary fraction explained in an official statement that they likewise would “not comply” with the invitation to the Grand Tattoo. Their protest was directed against the “glorification of the military through this central symbol, first of Prussian then of German militarism.” Gregor Gysi, the figurehead of the Left Party’s predecessor Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) declared his hope that this “sabre rattling” would stop and “be disappointed.”

Only three years later in 1998, Scharping, serving as the first Defense Minister of the SPD-Green Party coalition government under Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, ordered the Bundeswehr to Kosovo in its first combat mission since the Second World War. In 2001, the Bundeswehr invaded Afghanistan at the side of the United States. Yesterday, Scharping was among the ceremony’s honored guests and was officially greeted by the current Minister of Defense.

Since President Gauck and the German government publicly announced at the 2014 Munich Security Conference that Germany must carry out even broader military interventions to defend its economic and geostrategic interests globally, the Left Party has also come on board and transformed itself into a party of war.

What lies behind this rightward turn of the ruling elites, who together with the music corps of the Bundeswehr stand in the torchlight before the Reichstag listening to the “Deutschlandlied” (The song of the Germans)? In the final analysis, it is the desire of German imperialism for more markets, raw materials, strategic influence and world power which drives them back into the arms of German militarism.